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ABSTRACT

Traditional reference service at the Creighton University Health Sciences Library/Learning Resources Center has been transformed into a vibrant, information dissemination system. Maintaining routine reference skills and developing new ones is standard practice. The furious pace of demand for information, and the growing "technicalness" of information retrieval, have been met by a diversified approach: plenty of hands-on-teaching, proactive outreach, and customized assistance to individual customers as well as to entire departments. Constant review, evaluation and adjustment keep this system from crashing. On-going training, and support from the entire staff keep the library's approach invigorated and its outlook fresh. The paper describes the development and improvement of the library's reference services since the founding of the library in 1977; bibliographic instruction; lunchtime learning sessions and guest speakers; reference requests by e-mail; reference department use data; and staff cross-training. Photographs of library facilities and staff are provided. (Author/SWC)

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ED 410 981

PARTNERS IN LEARNING, OR REFERENCE SERVICE UNPLUGGED

Monica Pereira

Creighton University Health Sciences Library/Learning Resources Center

Omaha, Nebraska

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
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ABSTRACT

Traditional reference service at the Creighton University Health Sciences Library/ Learning Resources Center has been transformed into a vibrant, information dissemination system. Maintaining routine reference skills and developing new ones is standard practice. The furious pace of demand for information, and the growing 'technicalness' of information retrieval, have been met by a diversified approach: plenty of hands-on teaching, proactive outreach, and customized assistance to individual customers as well as to entire departments. Constant review, evaluation and adjustment keep this system from crashing. On-going training, and support from the entire staff keep our approach invigorated and our outlook fresh.

[*Picture 01*]*

The Creighton University Health Sciences Library/Learning Resources Center (HSL) [*Picture 02*] is twenty years old this year. Before its existence, health sciences books, serials and audiovisuals were housed in four separate locations: St. Joseph Hospital, the Criss II Building, the Boyne Building, and Reinert Alumni Library. In effect there were four health sciences libraries to serve the faculty, students and staff of the Schools of Dentistry, Medicine, Nursing, Pharmacy, and St. Joseph Hospital. In these more stringent times, the unavoidable duplication of some resources would be unconscionable. But even then, the waste was apparent to Leon "Benny"

* For a listing of pictures and illustrations, see Appendix.

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Benschoter, [*Picture 03*] Director of Biomedical Communications. Benny, who saw the HSL through to its completion in 1977, had in mind an efficient and modern library that would eventually deliver "twenty-four-hour library service."*

The HSL was planned and designed to be the one-stop shop for the Creighton community and St. Joseph Hospital. [*Picture 04*] Relocation of the discrete collections began over the July 4th weekend in 1977. Thus were the physical and intellectual resources of all the health sciences libraries for the first time embraced by one set of walls. [*Picture 05*] (In those years libraries were expected to have walls.) Only recently has the library come close to matching Benny's vision for it. Communications technology has allowed the HSL to become a virtual library and Benny, currently Vice-President for Information Systems, and constantly eager to forward the welfare of the HSL over the last twenty years, must finally feel some vindication of his ambitions for the HSL. [*Picture 06*]

But in the beginning, traditional library services included access to information through a reference department. Information, the currency of our existence, behaved itself better within that traditional structure. It allowed itself to be organized and indexed in predictable ways. It arrived in what seems now, like an orderly fashion. And above all, it didn't have the irreverent tendency to explode! Subject headings or descriptors were added and dropped in cycles of birth and retrenchment that reflected a forseeable response to information growth in the health sciences. Information was easy enough to find in print, [*Picture 07*] and the available print sources seemed sufficient for the needs of most of our clientele. Clients were not expected to search any databases themselves to glean the information they sought. Such databases were almost exclusively online, so dependence on paper indexes was paramount. The use of computer terminals for searching was the purview of professional searchers.

Reference service in the HSL matched those methodical times. The reference department was a pair of offices [*Picture 08*] having the subdued atmosphere of a cloister and inhabited by

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* Benschoter, Leon "Benny", interview by author, Omaha, Nebraska, 27 February 1997.

practitioners in the art of searching. There was no inkling that a library could be 'without walls.' Such a notion would almost surely have been perceived as unthinkable, and perhaps, threatening. The ways in which information was acquired was viewed perhaps with some awe by patrons. This aura may have been cultivated by the absence of a reference counter. Patrons aware of the search services offered would approach an office to make an appointment or introduce a request. Reference service was not available on weekends. Instead, a staff member in circulation would field potential reference questions and route them into one of two available tracks. Either an online search might be performed if the subject matter was familiar to the staff member, or the question was routed to reference staff to be resolved in the coming week.

[*Picture 09*]

Certainly, neither the climate of the times nor the Copernican approach of the reference department encouraged any changes. The vision of reference librarianship at the HSL did not yet consider the possibilities of locally networked electronic databases. It was not informed by the principles of customer service, as it is today. As a result, the need to be proactive in teaching patrons how to use the library's resources did not occupy much of the energy of the professional librarian. Also the print nature of most indexes made research, from the librarian's point of view, a fairly transferable skill. Outreach was an accidental matter consisting of waiting to be invited to speak to clients or being in the right neighborhood at the right time. Bibliographic instruction and familiarity with the library was not considered a necessary part of any curricula.

There was also a measure of concern that librarians were not perceived as professionals because their talents were somehow frittered away by their being so available. This insecurity probably influenced the desire to be situated within the confines of an office. The library literature of the time reflects this concern by suggesting reduced hours, the scheduling of appointments, and exploiting any special knowledge garnered by reference staff.[1] The reasoning was to let scarcity speak for the importance and professional status of the reference librarian. There was the accompanying worry over the uses of paraprofessional staff to serve at a reference desk. The

unique fear that a paraprofessional librarian would tell a customer that the library does not own a title[2] or does not perform a particular service now seems parochial[3] in the larger focus of trying to evaluate and improve services. But those concerns were a sign of the times in the HSL.

Admittedly, the role of academic librarians was changing over these years but those changes did not intrude on the comfortable mindset within the reference department at the HSL. This made the impending changes seem sweeping, if only because the cobwebs of the past hung so thickly. There was no premonition of being deluged by information, no urgency about embracing new technologies to enhance reference service, and no indication of treating information retrieval as a partnership with the client. The outmoded approach to reference service clearly needed to be replaced with a more viable and energetic one. After twelve years, the HSL was ready to begin a new adventure in reference service, the main feature of which would be to do as much for as many customers as possible.[4]

The first and most notable part of this change was the hiring in July 1988 of a new Head of Reference Services, Richard Jizba. [*Picture 10*] With him came a fresh philosophy of how reference service should be ordered and maintained. Reference service became "not a plan but an attitude" and its defining principle paralleled that of the business world, in which the customer is the reason for the business.* Two significant changes made within the first two years of Richard's arrival trumpeted the new public orientation. First, the reference department received a large and unmistakable [*Picture 11*] reference counter. The counter gave a home base to the reference department which "completely changed the complexion of reference."** It became a focal point for giving and receiving service, putting the reference department directly [*Picture 12*] in the public view. Its presence necessitated another change: consistent staffing. Previously, the reference department had been open 8a.m. - 5p.m., Monday through Friday. Its staff of two worked almost exclusively out of their offices. The previous service hours of reference have since

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* Jizba, Richard, interview by author, 7 March 1997.
** Godbey, E. Ruth, interview by author, 25 February 1997.

been doubled, and there is service on weekends as well. The staff now numbers five. In the words of our Director, Jim Bothmer, [*Picture 13*] the "reference counter eliminated barriers"* that office doors, even when open, did not.

Another change implemented within that time was the slimming down of the reference stacks. [*Picture 14*] What remained was a highly-used ready reference collection. All materials weeded out were either placed in the regular lending stacks or discarded. Six four-drawer cabinets of vertical files were whittled down to two, their contents being disposed of in a no-nonsense manner. Protestations that the reference department was being denuded of its wealth were countered with the challenge to share that wealth. Controlling multiple editions of a work, or irregular series titles, or outdated materials was not within the scope of reference and these tasks were forwarded to the proper departments. Drawers full of government documents were eventually sent to the University of Nebraska at Lincoln, after the proper permissions had been received. The survivors of this whittling process became the muscular core of the reference stacks. [*Picture 15*]

The next significant adjustment centered on searching. Searching had been severely limited by the desire to keep the search budget well under its allowance. Such retrograde efforts made for unsound reference policy. With Richard's arrival in the fall of 1988 this attitude was thoroughly renovated. Quality took precedence over the 'quick and dirty' method. Where appropriate, extra time and money were invested in ferreting out information. By requesting clear instructions from clients regarding what was required, search quality improved and customers' expectations of searchers rose to challenge the department further. All reference staff members were, and still are, sent to training and refresher courses in the relevant online databases. Practice to maintain skills is also provided for, and staff are free to use the no-charge hours offered by database providers on a monthly basis. Searches for our primary clients have always been

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* Bothmer, A. James, interview by author, 26 February 1997.

provided free of charge. As this fact became widely known, the number of searches done by the reference department increased dramatically.

Almost simultaneous to this, the number of our primary clients began to increase. The health sciences schools added programs to reflect the real world of patient care teams and other health care specialists. Satellite sites added even more clients to those numbers. The logistics of having more people to serve would have put an enormous strain on any reference department's resources. To help cope, MEDLINE in CD-ROM format was acquired in the fall of 1989. Four stand-alone stations each with its bank of CD-ROM drives introduced most of our customers to the notion of replacing the manual toil of using a print index with the nifty option of technology. [*Picture 16*] MEDLINE has since been joined by several other CD-ROM products on the library fileserver that Richard maintains and updates. Since the fileserver is housed in the library, updates are practically immediate. [*Picture 17*] Care has been taken to ensure that the databases we subscribe to are the ones that serve the majority of our varied client populations. With laissez-faire searching, it now became imperative to teach customers how to use the databases quickly and effectively.

The low-profile approach to bibliographic instruction was reversed. In the 1990-1991 academic year, workshops on how to search were instituted. Point-of-use teaching involved monitoring the activity around the database workstations and the public access catalog and being alert for customers who seemed unfamiliar with their use. Wherever possible, some exposure to the databases and the basic techniques of searching were slipped into numerous orientation sessions. Currently, if a demonstration is not an integral part of an orientation, pamphlets [*Picture 18*] on how to search are distributed. The pamphlets are designed to introduce one database each and include beginning as well as advanced search techniques. As part of the outreach efforts of the HSL, the reference department established the Lunch and Learn presentation. These one-hour sessions were, and are, open to anyone with an interest in the advertised topics. Attendees bring their lunches and the HSL supplies the soft drinks. The public relations benefit to the HSL is

practically incalculable. These sessions provide golden opportunities to learn more about our users.

At first, the Lunch and Learn opportunities were heavily invested in demonstrating the use of the electronic databases. Since then, the database producers have imparted a more uniform look and feel such that more than one database may be incorporated into a single Lunch and Learn workshop. Beginning in the fall of 1995 this compact approach was applied. It allows for a greater range of topics [*Picture 19*] for the Lunch and Learn workshops which now include the Internet, the World Wide Web and many of their health- and science-related uses. [*Picture 20*] Several faculty who have attended the Lunch and Learn sessions on the World Wide Web have requested tailored sessions for their classes. Reference staff have obliged with presentations to community health nursing classes, case managers at St. Joseph Hospital and the Creighton Neurology Department, to name just a few client groups.

To celebrate the diversity of interests in Creighton's community, there is a week of topics delivered by guest speakers each semester. These are collectively called the Lunch and Learn Symposia. They mark our library as being a place in which information can be shared across the disciplines. Some of our best attended sessions to date have been on herbal medicine [*Picture 21*] and a Halloween special [*Picture 22*] on vampires. However, not all the symposia topics relate directly to the health professions. For example, we have had well-attended sessions on the Bosnian crisis and Omaha architecture. The wide choice of topics has brought many in the Creighton-St. Joseph community to the HSL for the first time. This is exactly the kind of reward sought in trying to stamp our unique profile on the life of the campus and hospital communities. The variety certainly refreshes our own perspectives and keeps us thinking of novel ways to spend the symposia slots each semester.

In the spring of 1991, the reference department through the campus local area network initiated the Creighton Electronic Library System (CELS) to make the eletronic mailing of search requests a reality. In addition to walk-in and telephone clients, reference staff now keep an eye out

for email requests flashed onto the reference counter computer screens. Table I shows the trends in numbers of searches [*Picture 23*] and reference questions [*Picture 24*] since 1989:

Table I: Reference Counts (July, 1989 through April, 1997)

	1989/90	1990/91	1991/92	1992/93	1993/94	1994/95	1995/96	1996/97
Searches	1,797	1,962	2,776	2,740	2,646	3,047	2,784	2,032
Reference questions	6,285	6,609	7,227	5,215	5,374	6,808	5,548	4,808

The current year's numbers are the lowest since 1990-1991. Even when complete, they will not rival the next higher number of searches in the last eight years. The drop in the number of reference questions is probably the result of our aggressive program of tutorials and workshops, many of which cover search techniques and which are carefully tailored to unique sets of clients (e.g. third-year medical students beginning their surgery rotations or students in the accelerated nursing program).

Since 1994-1995, when our databases became networked, the numbers of search requests has dropped noticeably. In May, 1995, several network search accounts were initialized. Throughout the campus and St. Joseph Hospital [*Picture 25*] our customers accessed the databases from the convenience of their own work environments, and even from their homes. Table II [*Picture 26*] shows the total number of logins and averages of monthly and daily use and an average for each account.

Table II: Logins to Networked Databases (May 1995 - May 1997)

	1995/96	Number of Accounts	1996/97	Number of Accounts
Total	31,057	36	38,121	43
Monthly Average	2588.1	71.9	3176.8	73.9
Daily Average	86.3	2.4	105.9	2.5
Average per Account	862.7		886.5	

The numbers were culled from workstations used almost exclusively by our customers. At last count, more logins had been done at these sites than in the last eight years. This is evidence that

customers want to the ability to maintain their own research needs. The number of logins does not equal the number of searches, obviously. Some searches require more than one login before they are completed while several searches are sometimes done during just one login session. Even with some modest correction to account for these realities, the amount of searching far exceeds the number of searches the reference department has done over the past eight years.

[*Picture 27*]

The yearly drops in search requests and reference questions represent a settling period. For example, since 1995, we have added five databases,[5] that previously could only be searched online. Not adding these databases to the complement already available would have kept the level of search requests high. Clients like the freedom to search for information in as many databases as match their interests. The search service remains a huge advantage to customers who do not have the time or the inclination to search on their own or simply "appreciate [our] skill in navigating [the] maze."[6] There is an easy-on-the-eye web page (available since December, 1995) which is popular for requesting searches, while CELS continues its service to clients who have not yet acquired web access. Both the web search request page and CELS have added a dimension to reference service that quickly became as popular as walk-in and telephone requests. Eventually CELS will be phased out. With the World Wide Web being so ubiquitious, CELS has probably outlived its usefulness. Via electronic channels, the HSL has enhanced its clients' access to service.

Like ripples in a pond, news has spread that the reference department of the HSL is amenable to changing the way it serves in order to gain more customer recognition and support. In 1988, a drug information center, [*Picture 28*] staffed by doctoral pharmacy students, was installed in the library. The students required training in how to use the databases efficiently. In consultation with Pharmacy faculty, Richard designed a short course to accomplish this purpose. This became the germ for a semester-length course in searching offered every spring through the School of Pharmacy and Allied Health. Attendance in that course has been increasing steadily

over the last four years. In the meantime, the Pharmacy student rotations at the HSL and two other drug information sites continue to receive search training at the beginning of each four-week rotation. As a testimony to the regard in which our flexibility and readiness to serve are held, the reference staff team-taught a required course in computer literacy this semester for first-year dental students. In the fall of 1997, Richard will teach a new course designed for Medical Microbiology graduate students.

Counter-based reference work and aggressive pursuit of opportunities to be of service has brought plenty of exposure and increased clients' expectations. Word of mouth and direct soliciting has ballooned the number of educational workshops and sessions conducted by the reference department outside of the Lunch and Learn schedule. Just like it sounds, reference staff did go looking for more work to do. Table III [*Picture 29*] shows the total attendance in the last four academic years of all our educational sessions:

Table III: Educational Sessions (July, 1993 through April, 1997)

	1993/94	1994/95	1995/96	1996/97
Number of Sessions	99	66	78	122
Number of Attendees	400	650	875	1,714

The more open-handed style, has increased work for the circulation and interlibrary loan departments as well. For example, since December, 1995, when our web page was initiated for requests, the ratio of photocopy or interlibrary loan requests to searches (through the HSL website alone) is approximately 3:1. It is expected that ratio will keep growing. On a library-wide basis, we have chosen to celebrate these increasing claims on our time as an endorsement that the HSL is capable of meeting its new challenges.

These challenges grew directly out of examining our perceptions [*Picture 30*] of what reference service can and should be. Perhaps some of the assumptions shared by Richard and the reference staff appear self-defeating because of the economically stringent times in which libraries have to operate. Increasingly, budgets are frozen of cut and the service levels are expected to

remain the same. But, we maintain that there is little to lose by offering more service. In fact, we have everything to gain by ensuring that we become, and remain, a vital part of the research lives of our primary clients. The seemingly small gains made by one department can create much goodwill for the library as a whole.

The reference department has tried to enhance this goodwill through cross-training its staff. With the support of Jim [*Picture 31*] and Richard, reference staff are taught some circulation functions as well. This results in fewer snags on weekends, or even during more crowded moments on a weekday. In our mid-sized library, it makes sense that all the public-service staff [*Picture 32*] know how to check items out, or help locate reserve materials. This kind of flexibility contributes to the perception that a librarian is a multi-faceted individual. Some of the little economies that we make in reference contribute to the smooth running of the library as a whole and are well worth the inconveniences of having to fill copy machines, [*Picture 33*] or serve at the circulation counter for a while. But there are other more relevant assumptions about reference service that keep us looking for ways to serve customers while conserving our resources and energies.

[*Picture 34*]

Our reference philosophy is based on that of a corporate library. We recognize that our clients need to be independent enough to run their own searches. At the same time, we do searches on demand because our aim is to assist in the research they do. The searches we run are guaranteed to be completed within twenty-four hours. More pressing searches are done immediately. Regardless of the priority level placed on a search by a customer, most searches are completed within two to four hours. Often, a client who spends some time in the library after dropping off a search request can receive the results before leaving the library that day. We can afford to make such guarantees because we do not schedule any set desk hours. The eight hours a day each reference librarian spends are as likely to be filled with searching and bibliographic instruction as other client-centered activities.

Our practice may be contrary to the way many reference departments operate but it has advantages. There is hardly ever a backlog of searches to greet one. All the reference librarians working that day have the immediate benefit of each other's knowledge and expertise. There is usually always a backup librarian when one of us has to accompany a client to a source and explain its use. The number of people waiting for service at reference is usually small, and the wait never more than a few minutes. Clients seeking more in-depth information need make fewer trips back to the reference desk to seek further clarification if the librarian is available [*Picture 35*] to answer quick questions on the use of a source. Having a reference librarian available most of the hours that the library is open gives us more control on the clarity of the searches we need to do. This is something that voice mail or an answering machine cannot provide for adequately, if at all. The quality of our searches depends very much on understanding the questions asked. Clarifications at the time the search is requested is much more efficient for the client as well as the librarian; it keeps the searches relevant and underscores the partnership aspect of reference librarianship.

Gung ho reference service [*Picture 36*] has much to recommend it. It returns a clear picture of how reference service is evolving. It keeps us in touch with the immediate needs of clients. We can cull responses to any aspect of our service merely by being available. Reference librarians are in an excellent position to empower customers to "negotiate all the pitfalls of the system, not merely [the] obstacles to research."[7] As impressive as it may be to have telephone, electronic mail and World Wide Web access between librarians and clients, those channels can be rubble-filled when trying to get a human response. [*Picture 37*] There is ultimately nothing so satisfying as knowing that one has been heard, and this reciprocity applies equally to librarians and clients. Constant exposure to the variety of people we serve lends greater sensitivity to the possibilities of outreach and education all in the name of more sophisticated library use. [*Picture 38*]

Of course, our processes do not bring instantaneous or permanent results. Each semester or rotation of students brings new users to our facility. The cycle of partnership with our customers is renewed continuously. Relief from the crush of being needed is always a valuable commodity. To some degree, the routine mechanics of dealing with printers and copy machines provide some variety to the job. Rotation of weekend hours provides occasional balance to the hectic workweek with some calmer working conditions for staff. The Lunch and Learn presentations, especially those with the invited speakers, provide stimulation. Most of all, if we have more time these days, it is because customers do their own searching. The effect on our search load, while unintended, is certainly a justification of customer-based reference style. Of course, the issue of limited resources impinges on us whenever time and workloads collide. [*Picture 39*] The unpredictable nature of any service desk makes it difficult to prepare for all occasions. The reference staff included at least one fulltime and one on-call paraprofessional until very recently. Their input was a valued part of the reference service we offered. Staggering work schedules is another way to maximize staff time.

The HSL formula for adapting to change remains fluid. [*Picture 40*] Our approach to library services and reference work in particular hinges on small adjustments in how to serve the customer in the best manner with the most efficient use of library resources. Changes in the needs of each client group impact on the services we offer. And what we can offer in turn impacts on the clientele. The trick is to be aware of changing patterns of use and users so that adjustments can be made to accommodate them supportively. We wish to educate our clients to appreciate the wealth our library contains; we wish them to understand that our staff are an enormous part of that wealth. As partners in learning, we can do no less to fulfil our roles as librarians.

[*Picture 41*]

[1] Biggs, Mary. Replacing the Fast Fact Drop-In with Gourmet Information Service: A Symposium. The Journal of Academic Librarianship. March 1985, 11(2): 68-70.
[2] Rettig, James. Sharing our Bibliographic Knowledge. The Journal of Academic Librarianship. March 1985, 11(2): 76-7.
[3] Oberg, Larry R. Library Support Staff Deployment and Utilization: Achieving Clarity in an Age of Change. The Journal of Academic Librarianship. mth yr, v( ): 42-3.
[4] Fischer, Wenda Webster and Linda B. Reel. Total Quality Management (TQM) in a Hospital Library: Identifying Service Benchmarks. Bulletin of the Medical Library Association. October 1992 80(4): 347-52.
[5] BIOETHICSLINE Plu, CANCER-CD, EMBASE Drugs & Pharmacology CD, HeatlhSTAR, and PsycLIT.
[6] McCullough, Sue, RN. Letter to referecne staff, 28 April 1997.
[7] Rosenbaum, Joseph. Stay Close to Your Desk and Never Go to Sea. The Journal of Academic Librarianship. March 1985, 11(2): 72-3.

Partners in Learning
or
Reference Services Unplugged

presented by

Monica Pereira
Reference Librarian
Creighton University
Health Sciences Library / Learning Resources Center

1

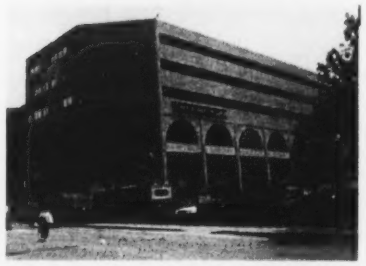
Health Sciences Library/Learning Resources Center

2

Leon "Benny" Benschoter, VP for Information Services

3

Saint Joseph Hospital (from North 30th Street)



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Bio-Information Center

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Front Door (C'mon in!)

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APPENDIX

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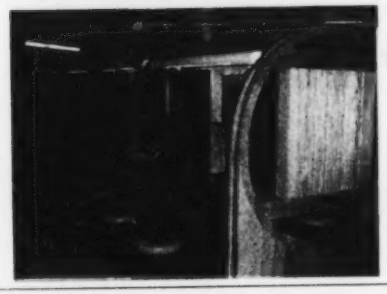
Index Tables



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Original Floorplan

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Richard Jizba,
Head, Reference and ILL Services

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Reference Counter (recto)

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Reference Counter (verso)

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A. James Bothmer, Director, HSL / LRC

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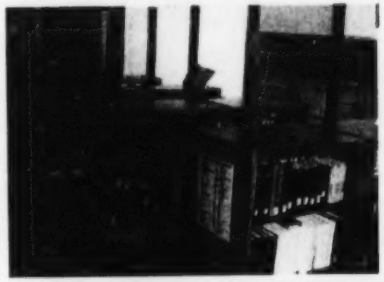
Reference Stacks



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Database Workstations

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More Database Workstations

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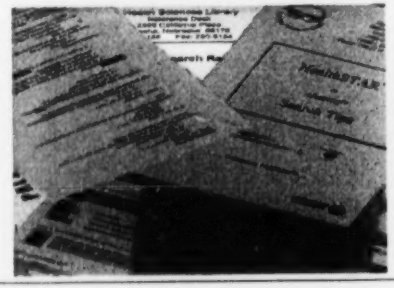
Search Pamphlets



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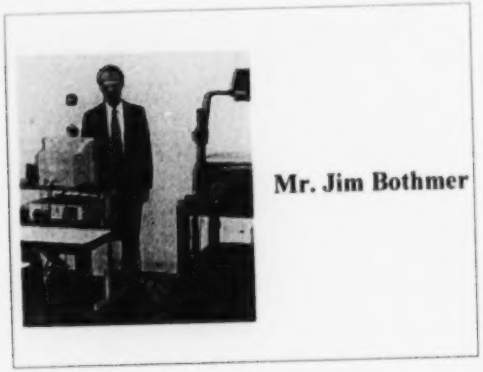

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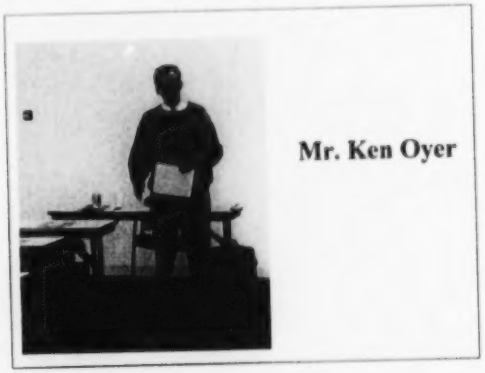

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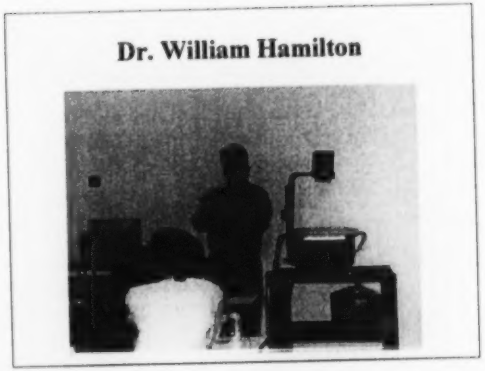

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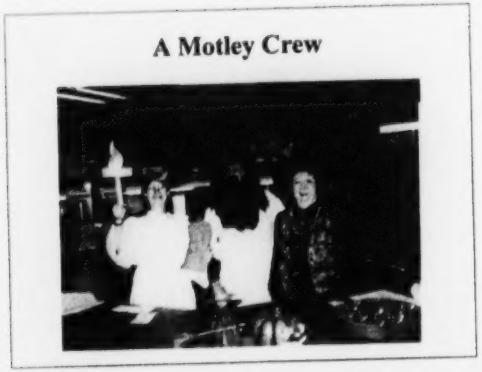

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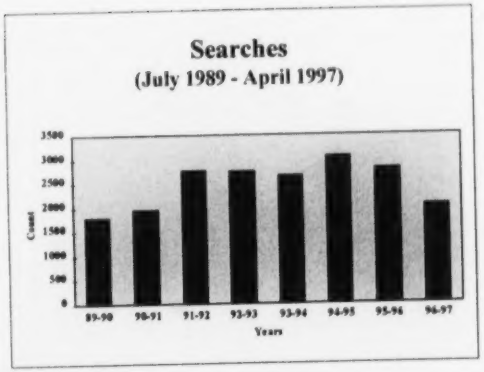

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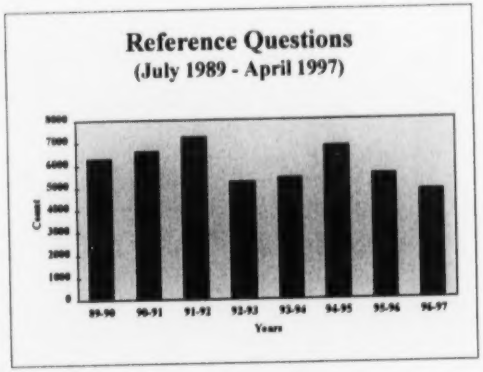

24

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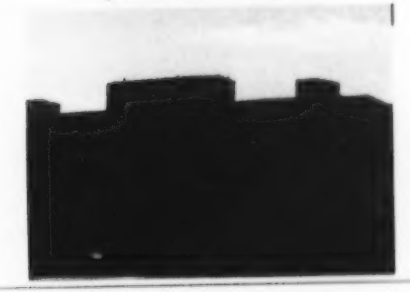
Saint Joseph Hospital (from east campus)



25

Logins to Networked Databases

	95/96	Number of Accounts	96/97	Number of Accounts
Total	31057	36	38121	43
Monthly Average	2588.1	71.9	3176.8	73.9
Daily Average	86.3	2.4	105.9	2.5
Average per Account	862.7		886.5	

26

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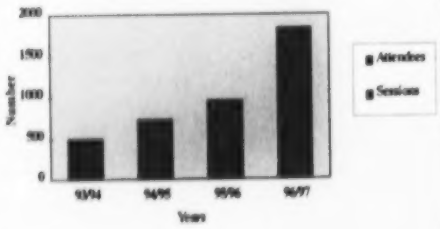
27

Drug Information Center

28

Educational Sessions (July 1993 - April, 1997)



29

Richard

30

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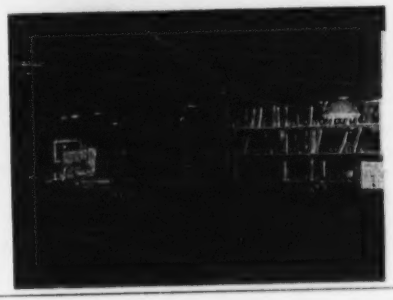
Jim

31

Circulation / Reserves / I.L.L.



32

Photocopy Machines

33

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34

ubiquitous

35

ready for action

36

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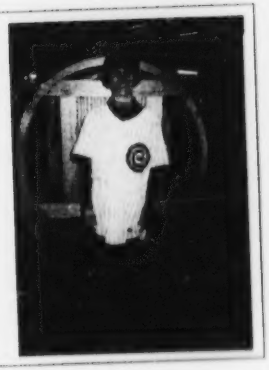
approachable



37

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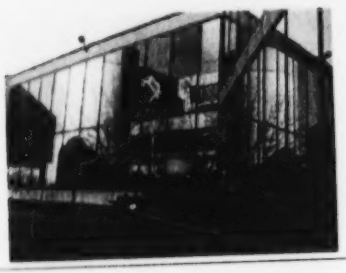
38

Reference Crew

39

Reflecting the User



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Acknowledgements

- A. James Bothmer, Director
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- the Staff of the Creighton University HSL/LRC

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